Learner Profiles, Learn Identities and Multiculturalism in Education

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I have been humbled and fortunate to have been surrounded by multiculturalism since a young age. I grew up in London. At the small secondary school I attended, I was one of only three white skinned boys in my year group. All major world religions and a number of nationalities and ethnic backgrounds were represented. This continued at university. There was a high international student population, and I had close friends with multiple cultures.

I cannot stress the depth of the words "humbled" and "fortunate" that I use above. There was so much I was able to learn from classmates. This included in the world of food as I was invited to friend's houses to dine. It included practices, as I was living alongside those who was fasting, and learned about different festivals. I was able to find out about how different cultures and countries were different from my own.

As an adult, I have moved to work in China and have now been able to experience a different culture through full emersion. As I have gained some knowledge of the international school scene, I have seen the diversity of cultures that exist there also.

Even with this, I still find sometimes that I do have unconscious biases. I am human. As we all do, I need to continually reflect, learn more and be honest with myself in this regard. Nonetheless, my experiences are supporting me to continually become more understanding of and open and loving towards other cultures, and I am fully appreciative of the experiences I have had.

As a teacher now then, I strive towards creating an environment, not only of appreciation towards, but also education about different cultures. In fact, with increased globalization, multiculturalism is becoming more important than ever in education. As One Education (2023) stated, "students today are experiencing a more multicultural environment than ever before", and "schools around the world become increasingly diverse".

I look today then at how knowing and understanding language learner identities can recognize and promote multiculturalism, in turn improving the learning outcomes for students.

We consider first the specific learner profiles of three different learners.

The first is a nine-year-old boy called Pedro. He moved to Arizona when he was six years old, and is from a Spanish speaking background, with English as a second language. He is a natural leader, acting as the man at home with his dad often at work, helping take care of his younger sister. He is interested in sports and in going into construction. While he has friends at school, he is faced with challenges showing the full extent of his character, abilities and personality, due to the language barrier.

The second is a twelve-year-old girl called Maria. She is from Ecuador and only three months ago moved to Indianapolis in Indiana. She has a deep interest in nature and photography, stemming from her background. It has only been since moving to the United States that she has begun using English in her day-to-day life. While she is now making progress here, she faces challenges feeling socially distanced from all classmates, except one close friend, as her background is very different from their urban life.

The third is a fourteen-year-old woman called Anna. She is of Russian and Chinese background and attends an international school in Azerbaijan. She is a deeply thoughtful and creative person, enjoying music, arts

and creative writing. She has some challenges with the Russian language she is studying, and also with worrying, which can affect her self-confidence and time management.

Pedro and Maria are in a similar situation in that they are both from Spanish backgrounds and have moved to the US. Anna's context is a little different in that regard. In the light of considering multiculturalism more broadly however, we will be considering all three were they in different educational contexts, considerations that should be made and questions and concerns that we might have.

No matter what the context though, the essential consideration is that all three have the open environment where they can be themselves at school, have their interests and backgrounds acknowledged, and more, be able to apply these in different contexts in their school lives (Edutopia, 2020a). A question I would always ask is, 'Is the effort being made to get to know the students?' (One Education, 2020; University of Kansas School of Education & Human Sciences, 2023), and once they are known, is this information being applied to create a personalized environment for them? Is Pedro being given support to have leadership opportunities at school? Is Anna given space for free art work and creative writing, free from a focus on deadlines, and support to take her passions here, further? Is Maria allowed the opportunity to practice photography and explore nature through school activities?

I look at three different educational contexts and questions, concerns or considerations that might be especially relevant in each. However, really, all apply to all contexts.

The first context is within the regular school system in the US. Note here that there would be similarities in other largely English-speaking countries, for example, the UK, and more broadly, in a regular local school in any country. It is the context Pedro and Maria are in.

As the school is of a country and in that country, a concern would be a recline towards an unconscious and accidental bias, with the students viewed through a deficit lens (Chajed, 2020), which could see the challenges the student's viewed as a fault of their own, which could have detrimental effects on their wellbeing and resultant progress at school. Anna is already in a situation in which she may need support building up belief in herself. For Pedro and Maria's case, there is the deep risk of them blaming themselves for any challenges they may face with English.

It is essentially important that considerations are made here, therefore. Chajed (2020) goes on to state careful considerations that must be made. Again, we must take the time to get to know our students. This could be done for example, through time spent with individual students where this is feasible, or student surveys. Not only will this teach instructors more about their students, but also the time taken in planning and implementing this will help create a mindset of always thinking about our students on an individual basis, and consciousness of the differences and cultural needs in our classroom. As you get to know your students better, you can gear resources and practice towards them. Resources in Spanish could be made available for Pedro and Maria. Methods of instruction could also be adapted to meet the different students' needs (Vance, 2024). For example, more opportunities to experience nature could be included for Maria.

Vance (2024) hints on the importance of working with staff to eliminate their biases. It will be important that on an ongoing basis, working with students from culturally different backgrounds, leaders and school districts give staff support as necessary.

A further question I might have (Vance, 2024) is "How are students grouped into classes?". If students are grouped by their recent academic results, this could negatively affect students whose English, in the case of Pedro and Maria, or management to complete all work, in the case of Anna, mean that they are not being given full opportunity to excel. In fact, it could again be a deficit lens. An improved consideration might be to have more open or mixed groupings as far as possible. Students of different backgrounds within the groups could then learn from and inspire each other. University of Kansas School of Education & Human

Sciences (2023) emphasises the importance of having high expectations for all students. This helps aspire for this goal.

With the students in this context being English Language Learners, possibly in a minority, following a regular curriculum in English, a final consideration is providing adequate training and resources to teachers and schools in the area to support English learners (Sugarman & Lazarín, 2021).

We move now to the second context. This is that of an international school, for example in Asia, or the Middle East, as Anna attends. This type of international school will be one that follows a more rigid standard curriculum an English-speaking country such as the US or the UK.

With the curriculum being slightly more rigid, a question I would have is "are students given the opportunity to share their own experiences during class discussions so that they can have their voice, feel at home and learn from each other?" Corwin (n.d.-a) emphasizes the importance of the assets all students bring to the learning community for them and for others.

A consideration that could therefore be made during class discussions is the opportunity for students to share their own experiences they may have related to a topic. This could be allowed for both in normal academic study especially in the social studies subjects, but also in homeroom time. This would further allow students to lead by their identities, feeling at home and being able to thrive. Pedro's interests in building and construction for example, could allow him to offer much on topics where these are relevant.

Although international, with the school still being very focused on the curriculum from one country, another question I might have, is "is there still opportunity for use of the first language?". Hessouh (2016) and Leaning (2017) both state the importance of mother tongue. Not only is it part of us, but it is also a primary means by which we might express ourselves. García (2017) emphasizes that by only allowing one language use, we are allowing only a small proportion of a student's full linguistic repertoire to be used.

A consideration might be to allow students to teach their classmates and teachers, words from their mother tongue (Corwin, n.d. -b), which for the case of Pedro and Maria, is Spanish. This could be in the context of the student teaching everyday greeting language, which could then easily be used in the class community, or even specific language related to areas of interest, for example Pedro could talk about buildings, or about football. This would allow them to build up their sense of belonging in the class, again, allowing others to learn from them, and also create an atmosphere of openness towards the student's mother tongue within the classroom, allowing the student to use it, or to use translanguaging as necessary, even if some translation, for example, through technology may be needed by the teacher or classmates.

Now then for the final type of school we consider. This is also an international school, for example, in Asia or the Middle East. However, it is one in which the curriculum is more international and inquiry based, for example, IB.

In this context, the school might have a greater diversity of cultures and be more open towards different languages.

A question I may still have however is 'how is the school working to engage with families?' One Education (2023) for example, noted a number of ways in which families could be involved. Regular contact with families can take place and families can be involved in class projects, for example, by some of the project being done with family at home, or by family joining for class activities or field trips. As Vance (2024) states, "culturally responsive teaching involves connecting with students and their families to ensure they receive the most effective education."

Considerations we would need therefore are implementing a number of channels for parent communication, including face-to-face, over the phone and online. Corwin (n.d. -b) reminds us of the importance of having

important school documents and communication translated into the mother tongue. This is a practice that could be followed. Communication in first language could prove beneficial for the parents of Maria and Pedro who are both very busy, so they can be aware of what is happening at school, and possible methods for involvement could be explored. Anna's mum is very open to cooperating with the school already.

Once relationships are established, parents can even be invited into school, to share more about their home countries and cultures, building up the sense of belonging for the student and their family even further, and allowing the class community to develop an appreciation of different culture and background to a greater extent.

The second question I would have is, "what does the school do, to drive its own cultural education for the students"? The students themselves can bring in their culture, and we can support them in that, but furthermore, schools can actively promote cultural education and opportunities to experience other cultures. One consideration would be celebrating festivals from around the world (Vance, 2024). Anna could benefit from the celebrating of Chinese festivals for example. A second would be offering extra-curricular activities that focus on cultures (Edutopia, 2020b), for example a society based on nature of the outdoors for Maria.

We see therefore the depth required in considering multiculturalism in the classroom, with a range of different aspects to consider. Again, although I looked at three educational contexts for a focus, really all the questions, concerns, considerations and ideas, would be applicable across the different contexts.

We conclude by consolidating answers to two questions.

The first is, how can understanding language learner identities promote multiculturalism and enhanced learning outcomes for the student? We have seen how understanding a student's identify can enable the learning environment to be shaped for their best interests. This can include adaptations to the way we teach and the resources we have available, the opportunity for them to share their culture with their classmates and use it to drive their learning, use of the mother tongue as necessary, and effective work alongside parents and families. We then allow them the student's to bring their culture to school with them to support their own learning journey, but also to allow others to learn from it. Multiculturalism is therefore promoted. If students feel a sense of belonging, they will be able to learn naturally and effectively allowing for enhanced learning outcomes. The enhanced learning could be not only for the students at question, but also classmates, as they learn about and are taught to embrace the different culture and background, and hear the insight of the experiences of the student.

The second question is, why is understanding learner identities and multiculturalism important? As we have seen, understanding learner identities is essential for allowing us to build a student-centred environment, and also for us to improve our practice as teachers, by reflecting on how to adapt our teaching to meet differing needs, as well as on our own biases.

With regards to the importance of embracing multiculturalism in education, well Okoye-Johnson (2011) found that it has potential to improve student's racial attitudes, and similarly, Leung (2022), that it can increase empathy in student towards others and different situations. Teaching with an understanding of students' own cultures and using examples and relatable concepts from their cultures in instruction, can help to reduce the achievement gap (Qondias, Lasmawan, Dantes, & Arnyana, 2022) that could otherwise exist.

Again, from my own life experience, I have seen the benefits of embracing other cultures, from deeper and more diverse friendships you can make, to the increased knowledge you can learn about the world, and more open-minded you can become.

My current school has cultural events from different countries each month. This has included the school's country of China, as well as Korea, from where we have students, the countries of the school's foreign

teachers, including South Africa, the US, the UK and Canada, Thailand, where some of our teachers have previously lived, and further countries from around the world. I am proud to have been a part of this.

Multiculturalism is something that can even go beyond students to include teacher's and other members of staff also, in the globalized world, and is vitally important in building a welcoming school community where all can be happy and excel.

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